

## SUMMARY

# Making Evaluation Work in the Nonprofit Sector A Call for Systemic Change

### SECTOR DRIVEN EVALUATION STRATEGY



Sharing perspectives = Better evaluation.



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@ Foundation House, 2 St. Clair Ave. E., Suite 300, Toronto, Ontario, M4T 2T5 | 416-642-5786  
admin@theonn.ca | theonn.ca

# Introduction

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The Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) developed a [Sector Driven Evaluation Strategy](#) to promote an ecosystem in the nonprofit sector that enables nonprofits to make thoughtful use of evidence to further their missions and service to communities. Fundamentally, a sector that embraces evaluation is one that is more focused on the values of understanding, discovery, critical reflection, and continuous improvement. ONN understands that high quality and useful evaluation is an important tool for the sector and has put together seven key recommendations for improving evaluation and learning in Ontario's nonprofit sector.

## 7 Recommendations for Improving Evaluation in Ontario's Nonprofit Sector

### Promote learning and action before measurement

1. Create safe spaces for sharing evaluation findings.
2. Develop learning organizations.

### Make more strategic use of evaluation resources

3. Use the right evaluation approach for the job.
4. Match evaluation investments to expectations.
5. Differentiate evaluation and accountability.

### Expand what evaluation can achieve for the nonprofit sector

6. Investigate the full impact of the nonprofit sector.
7. Evaluate evaluation.

**This position paper is a call for systemic changes that will create an ecosystem within which it is straightforward, efficient, and rewarding for nonprofits and funders to invest in evaluation work.**

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## What do we mean by the evaluation ecosystem?

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The ecosystem includes:

- *Government funders.*
- *Public and private funders.*

- *Provincial and national associations or umbrella groups (like ONN, for example).*
- *Policy think tanks and regulatory bodies.*
- *Academic researchers and evaluation practitioners.*
- *The public.*

## Our Seven Recommendations

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### Promote learning and action before measurement

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#### **1. Create safe spaces for sharing evaluation findings**

Safe spaces for sharing evaluation findings are where nonprofits know they will not be penalized for negative evaluation results. Safe spaces typically involve peer-to-peer sharing with similar nonprofits. They invite the sharing of stories and examples, as well as numbers. They use facilitation techniques that encourage sharing and learning from mistakes and unexpected findings. They allow for discussions that are sufficiently open-ended and with enough time to uncover the deeper evaluation insights that may not be immediately obvious.

In our conversations with Ontario nonprofits, we have learned that independent provincial networks, umbrella groups, and resource centres are well suited to creating these kinds of spaces. They have experience synthesizing diverse information from different kinds of nonprofits and sharing that information with others. They often host conferences and other gatherings and so they have the facilitation skills to manage complex discussions. They hold little or no power over their members' funding.

It should be made easier for nonprofits, funders, and the general public to find the results of evaluation work in the nonprofit sector.

#### **2. Develop learning organizations**

A nonprofit organization that has a culture of learning is more likely to do useful evaluation work. Organizations (whether they are government departments, non-governmental funders, or nonprofits) that support their staff to think critically and continually reflect on their progress with an eye to improvement are organizations that inherently value evaluation and related

processes like story telling, development of innovative programming, and inter-organizational collaboration of planning.

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## Make more strategic use of evaluation resources

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### 3. Use the right evaluation approach for the job

Matching the *why* of evaluation and related kinds of work to the *how* can be challenging. Finding the right approach begins with understanding the purpose of the work and a discussion of whether evaluation is truly appropriate, and if so, what kind.

Evaluators and applied researchers working in the nonprofit sector can play a key role in educating government, nonprofits, and other funders about the appropriate uses of various types of evaluation work

### 4. Match evaluation investments to expectations

Before starting any evaluation, a review of existing literature on the subject should be done to see if an evaluation will help lead to new insights or merely reproduce results that others have already proven.

In order to build an ecosystem that promotes meaningful evaluation, all funders should recognize the role they play in how evaluations are financially supported. Funders can support evaluation in ways other than providing direct funding to nonprofits, such as by contracting with an external resource group to support evaluation or by providing training opportunities to nonprofits.

Nonprofits themselves also play a key role in acting on this recommendation. Properly planning for evaluation and embedding evaluation in budgets can help in the creation of learning organizations.

## 5. Differentiate evaluation and accountability

Evaluation is impactful when it serves a clear and specific purpose. It is important to differentiate measurement work undertaken for the purposes of accountability more clearly from evaluation work focused on demonstrating meaningful local impact, ongoing learning, and action.

Funders have a key role to play in making sure that their own accountability requirements are clear and appropriate and that they do not require nonprofits to submit data they are not intending to use.

More focus should be paid to developing evaluation as an exercise where nonprofits, governments, funders, and other stakeholders are committed to ongoing learning.

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## Expand what evaluation can achieve for the nonprofit sector

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### 6. Investigate the full impact of the nonprofit sector

To enable the nonprofit sector to meet the evolving needs and aspirations of communities in an ongoing way, we need an evaluation ecosystem that addresses a wider range of evaluation questions and equips nonprofits to adapt quickly. How do nonprofits support vibrant communities? What strategies are effective in bringing organizations together to solve problems? What is the long-term impact of activities like early childhood development, health promotion, or integrated community food systems? With a better understanding of the social, economic, environmental, and cultural impacts of the nonprofit sector in communities and regions, the nonprofit sector can support decision makers in their efforts to develop laws, regulations, funding frameworks, and policies that allow the sector to better serve their communities.

Applied researchers and capacity building organizations are often best equipped to undertake the more complex and longer-term studies needed to set the stage for evaluating the full impact

of the sector. Nonprofits, governments, and funders also play a key role and can incorporate these broader benefits or impacts of the sector into their evaluation work.

## 7. Evaluate evaluation

There is very little empirical evidence about the size and scope of evaluation work in the sector, or the degree to which these investments have achieved their intended outcomes.

# Conclusion

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The seven recommendations presented here are meant as a call to action. They have emerged from over two years of dialogue with nonprofits, public and private funders, government, and other evaluation stakeholders around the challenges and opportunities to creating a more useful evaluation ecosystem.

ONN believes that the nonprofit sector is ready for and in need of an evaluation ecosystem that consistently leads to useful evaluation and learning. This means focusing on how to develop an evaluation ecosystem that:

- Promotes learning and action before measurement;
- Makes more strategic use of evaluation resources; and
- Expands what evaluation can achieve for the nonprofit sector.

Evaluations are not done alone. Instead, they often include multiple actors who each play a role in determining the relevance and use of an evaluation. Nonprofits, governments, funders, and others must realize, accept, and embrace their role in the evaluation ecosystem. This means being clear in their own expectations, as well as the expectations of their partners, the intended purpose(s) of the evaluation, and the ways in which learning and accountability will be prioritized, supported, and embedded into the work.

## ABOUT ONN

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Organized in 2007 and incorporated as a nonprofit in 2014, the Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) is the independent nonprofit network for the 55,000 nonprofits and charities in Ontario, focused on policy, advocacy, and services to strengthen Ontario's nonprofit sector as a key pillar of our society and economy.

ONN works to create a public policy environment that allows nonprofits and charities to thrive. We engage our network of diverse nonprofit organizations across Ontario to work together on issues affecting the sector, and channel the voices of our network to government, funders and other stakeholders.

## OUR VISION

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A Strong and Resilient Nonprofit Sector. Thriving Communities. A Dynamic Province.

## OUR MISSION

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To engage, advocate, and lead with—and for—nonprofit and charitable organizations that work for the public benefit in Ontario.

## OUR VALUES

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**Courage** to take risks and do things differently. **Diversity** of perspectives, creativity and expertise to get stuff done. **Optimism** and **determination**. **Solutions** created by the sector, with the sector, for the sector. **Celebrating** our successes and **learning** from our experiences. **Strength** that comes from working **together**.

**[www.theonn.ca](http://www.theonn.ca)**